

PASTORAL SERMON
The Fifteenth Sunday of Luke
By V. Rev. Timothy Baclig, January 27, 2019

Like in the days of Zacchaeus, today people of certain professions have a stigma attached to their person. Zacchaeus, mentioned in this morning's Gospel, was a tax collector for the hated Roman state which practiced the oppressive taxation during the times of Jesus. As a tax collector Zacchaeus was regarded by his fellow Jews to be a great sinner and a man completely given over to worldly values. He was a man of the harsh realities of the world—ruthless competition for wealth, exploitation of every opportunity, the aggressive pursuit of selfish interests. Religion was not for him.

Zacchaeus, for some reason, however, was curious and interested in Jesus. It was not mere curiosity but the first stirrings of faith that made him risk embarrassment by climbing a tree in order to see Jesus as he passed through Jericho. Zacchaeus was in search of something.

There are people today, who one might think, are not in the least interested in matters of faith and religion. From time to time I am remarkably surprised. I think it has a lot to do with one's ability to be open minded; to "think outside of the box;" to recognize that "I really don't have it together or "know it all." It also helps if Christians have that attitude in encountering others in matters of faith. The older I get, the more I realize that people really have choices and that you and I are really not in control or can be in control of others. What pains many parents is the hard truth of this as their children become adults.

At the end of today's Gospel we hear Jesus say to Zacchaeus, "...this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." There was definitely something about Zacchaeus' conscience that prompted him to seek, to see and to hear Jesus. And because of this desire, God brought about a wonderful change in Zacchaeus, an astonishing liberation from his old self, his previous ways of thinking and the values and life pattern of a tax collector of that time.

Notice that it was outside of the Synagogue and away from the temple where the encounter took place. Zacchaeus probably did not even think of going to the Synagogue or Temple, and even if he did, the religious custom of his time would not have allowed him to enter. But the day that Jesus spoke in the city of Jericho (a town that had a high population of priests); Zacchaeus went out of his way to be amidst the crowd.

We, at St. Michael have begun introducing our teens to: “The Relationship Project” - a new approach in Christian education produced by *Faithtree Resources*; that is actually not “new,” but very Biblical. The “Relationship Project” demonstrates by its engaging group discussions that the Church is not a monologue and was never meant to be. The Gospel provides countless examples of how Christ engaged others and met them where they were. Today’s Gospel lesson is a perfect example among many others: The Samaritan woman, Nicodemus, the adulterous woman, Simon Peter, and the list goes on and on. Just take time to read all of the conversations recorded in the gospels and you will find that in each instance it was a face-to-face conversation.

When you and I consider how many ways we communicate today, you will understand why what Faithtree is doing is very important. There was a time when all we had was a land-line telephone (and that was not very long ago!). Then came computers and e-mails, then came smart phones, then, texting, twitter then, FaceBook, even Skype and FaceTime. There are many more ways for you and I to avoid a personal face-to-face conversation today. With every technological advances there are advantages and disadvantages. The means by which we form, develop and maintain relationships must be re-examined with honesty. We have resorted to all of these avenues and devices because you and I are in need of real relationships. God has always made Himself available to us. But we have received all kinds of distorted images and messages of who He really is.

St. Kyril writes concerning today’s Gospel lesson: Zacchaeus was chief of tax collectors, a man entirely (abandoned) given to covetousness [greed] ... But he did not continue among their number... He sought to see [Jesus], but the multitude prevented him. St. Kyril goes on to say that it was not so much the people that had prevented him from seeing Jesus, as it was his sins. He was of [small] stature, not merely in a bodily point of view, but also spiritually. Zacchaeus could, in no other way see him, unless he was raised up from the earth. St. Kyril then comments: ...for in no other way can a man see Christ and believe in Him, except by mounting up into the sycamore [tree], by rendering foolish his members which are upon earth, fornication, uncleanness, etc.

The same is true for any of us whose lives are so preoccupied with our concerns of this world. The Divine Liturgy for us is a time for “laying aside all worldly cares” as we are about to sing in the Cherubic Hymn. It is not for the purpose of escaping the realities of our life, but to help us in gaining a clear perspective on life – a life, that is for us eternal life.

The radical transformation in Zacchaeus' life was the love of God working through Christ. Christ through His personal presence and divine love touched Zacchaeus and completely changed him. The conversion power of God's love flowing through Christ transformed Zacchaeus into a new, free and joyful man. I again want to point out to us that it was not in the Synagogue or around the Temple where Zacchaeus' life was changed but by the personal encounter that Zacchaeus had by seeking, and by Jesus' personal visit to Zacchaeus' home.

One of the reasons why my visitation with you in your home, and for each of us to spend time with each other is so important is because there needs to be *kinonia* [spiritual bond of fellowship] – something that extends our time together from corporate worship, “social fellowship,” and even business meetings. It is essential that we take the time to meet personally, to get to know each other, to pray together, and to support one another beyond being together at church.

In addition our parish's 50th Anniversary Planning Committee has initiated neighborhood house gatherings this year. If you would like to host a two hour evening gathering in your home to get to know the parishioners in your neighborhood, please let us know by speaking with me or contacting Carolyn Sadd at: mysittee@yahoo.com

Prayer

O Christ, our God, visit us today, that we like Zacchaeus may be transformed in mind, heart and soul. May we lay aside all worldly cares that we may receive You – the King of all. For Thou art our help, our Stronghold, and our Salvation and to Thee do we ascribe glory, together with Thy Father who is unoriginate, and Thine All-Holy, good, and Life-giving Spirit; now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.